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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for an increase in media literacy training to help students combat the mixed health messages found in the media. Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages. Much of the paper deals with laying out specific exercises school health educators and other teachers can use to incorporate media literacy into health education. The paper suggests that through media literacy students can learn to evaluate critically the health messages in various media outlets. Once students realize how the media package messages, they will be more aware of what to look for and how to interpret what they see and hear. Health related messages will be scrutinized and judged with a critical eye; such scrutiny should make students more aware of their health and encourage them to avoid behaviors detrimental to their health. Contains 72 references. (Author/NKA)

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Media Literacy: A Health Education Perspective

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Media Literacy: A Health Education Perspective

Abstract

This paper argues for an increase in media literacy training to help students combat the mixed health messages found in the media. Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages. Much of the paper deals with laying out specific exercises school health educators and other teachers can use to incorporate media literacy into health education. The paper suggests that through media literacy students can learn to evaluate critically the health messages in various media outlets. Once students realize how the media package messages, they will be more aware of what to look for and how to interpret what they see and hear.

Media Literacy: A Health Education Perspective

The pervasiveness of the mass media creates a seemingly endless flow of information. Contained in the flow are various forms of health information. Consumers of the media are at the mercy of the respective media outlets to provide them with the most current and accurate information possible. Although the health community recognizes the power of the mass media to disseminate information about health risks and prevention measures, unfortunately, the purposes of the two entities are not the same. As a result, the public is not always informed of possible health risks or preventative measures; not all health messages are easily understood, and some messages contain misleading or false information (Signorielli, 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988).

The recognition of the mass media's dissemination power as well as the potential dangers of sending inaccurate information or omitting vital information spawned an effort by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the National Cancer Institute, and the Office for Substance Abuse Prevention to examine how the mass media and health community could work together more effectively (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988).

The subsequent report, Mass Media and Health: Opportunities for Improving the Nation's Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988), revealed a number of areas that needed attention. Among the major recommendations were for the health community to acknowledge the mass media's priorities, to use all facets of the media in developing health messages, to improve the communication skills of those in public health, and to educate individuals about how to interpret health information in the media.

While all of the recommendations are vital to the effective dissemination of health information, the final recommendation-to educate the public about how to interpret health messages in the media-is more closely associated with the focus of this paper. In three of the six sections (marketing communications, news, and entertainment) of the report, recommendations were made to teach consumers of the media how to interpret and critically evaluate the messages they receive. Therefore, an in-depth examination of this topic seems justified.

After reading the recommendations of the investigators, it is apparent that their concerns can be addressed through the concept of media literacy.

> Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 6-7).

This definition of media literacy focuses primarily on children/students, which is in accord with the recommendations outlined in the governmental report. It is vital to teach younger consumers of the media because they are the most vulnerable to media messages; although, it is important for adults, too.

The topic of media literacy has been studied by a number of scholars in recent years (Adams & Hamm, 1989; Blair, 1995; Brown, 1991; Considine, 1990; Considine, 1994; Considine, 1995; Considine & Haley, 1992; Cortes, 1992; Crump, 1995; Duncan, 1989; Graham, 1989; Houk & Bogart, 1974; Lloyd-Kolkin & Tyner, 1988; McLaren, 1995; Melamed, 1989; Passe, 1994; Robinson, 1994; Silverblatt, 1995; Trampiets, 1995). In addition, several organizations have grown out of the media literacy effort, most notably the Center for Media Education, the Center for Media Literacy, the National Telemedia Council, and Citizens for Media Literacy. Moreover, the National Communication Association (formerly the Speech Communication Association) has developed standards for speaking, listening, and media literacy in K-12 education. Furthermore, several schools throughout the nation have some component of media literacy already within their curricula. Among the participants are schools in Georgia, New Mexico, North Carolina, Minnesota, and Massachusetts (Considine, 1995; Darlington, 1996). Media literacy is also reaching the community through workshops conducted by the National PTA and Cable in the Classroom (Considine, 1995). Given all of these efforts on behalf of media literacy, it is more than apparent that it is an issue of great importance.

Typically, media literacy programs have focused on television violence and persuasive techniques in advertising. However, this paper will deviate from the traditional focus and attempt to apply media literacy concepts and principles to health messages.

The paper will review the relevant literature dealing with media literacy and health messages and explore the relationship between media literacy and health information. Much of the paper will deal with laying out specific exercises school health educators and other teachers can use to incorporate media literacy into health education related to the most important health risks facing children and adolescents. The ultimate goal of the paper is to add another dimension to the media literacy concept and provide evidence for a method of education that will satisfy the recommendations to educate the public about health information in the media made in the governmental report, Mass Media and Health: Opportunities for Improving the Nation's Health.

MEDIA LITERACY AND HOW IT WORKS

According to Media Literacy (1989), a textbook published by the Ministry of Education in Ontario, what we know about the world beyond our immediate surroundings comes to us via the media. Unfortunately, the media does not present its messages in a neutral and value-free way; it shapes and distorts reality (Considine, 1990; Melamed, 1989). This poses a problem for society. Individuals, especially students, are unable to distinguish between genuine and questionable messages sent by the media. For example, NBC's "ER" has encouraged responsible sexual behavior by showing Dr. Doug Ross giving condoms to a teenage girl who was living on the street, but it also depicted irresponsible sexual behavior when it was revealed that Dr. Peter Benton got his girlfriend pregnant. In order to handle these mixed messages young people must be taught to be responsible consumers of the media. But who is going to do the teaching? The logical choice is America's educators.

Several researchers have called for the inclusion of media education within existing school curricula (Considine, 1990; Duncan, 1989; Kahn & Master, 1992; Melamed, 1989; Wulfemeyer, Sneed, Van Ommeren, & Riffe, 1990). They argue that media education makes students critically aware of what they see, hear, and read. Television/video/film viewing and magazine reading are

no longer ways to pass the time. They are learning opportunities. Students analyze and critique messages and determine how they could be said better or differently. Media education also gives groups of students the opportunity to work together toward a common goal. In the process they learn about responsibility, cooperation, and problem-solving. No matter what they do in life, they will always encounter situations that require these skills. In addition, students identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop varied interests, and accept new challenges.

MEDIA LITERACY AND HEALTH EDUCATION

Much of the early media literacy literature focused on the call for including media literacy within the existing school curricula. Attention was given to defining media literacy skills and garnering support for the movement (Duncan, 1989; Considine, 1990; Wulfmeyer, et al., 1990). In the years since the movement began, leaders within the movement have been able to agree on a basic, more comprehensive definition of media literacy as well as identify fundamental objectives (Aufderheide, 1993). According to the Aspen Institute's Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy,

> a **media literate person**--and everyone should have the opportunity to become one--can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy in relationship to all media. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1).

As mentioned in the introduction, school districts and individual public and private schools throughout the country including the Rocori School District-Minnesota, Billerica schools-Massachusetts, Albuquerque Academy-New Mexico, Columbus School for Girls-Georgia, and Athens Academy-Georgia, have been receptive to media literacy (Considine, 1995; Darlington, 1996). These educational institutions have been models for others across the nation who are considering the implementation of media education.

As the media literacy movement continues to grow, its range of emphases is expanding (Aufderheide, 1993). As mentioned above, one area of emphasis is health information. Traditionally, the literature rarely has separated health issues from the more common areas of

focus like advertising and violence. However, more recent literature has given health education and health crises their due (Considine, 1994; Considine, 1995).

Impact of Mass Media on Adolescent Health

Given the focus of this paper it is important to establish the relationship between the mass media and the health of young adolescents. Many would agree that the media are the biggest educators in today's society (Strategies, 1992). "By age 18 a young person will have seen 350,000 commercials and spent more time being entertained by the media than any other activity except sleeping" (Davies, 1993, p. S-28).

Such media-saturation is cause for concern, especially in the area of health. Davies (1993) discussed the impact of the media on adolescents in terms of nutrition, sexual information, alcohol and tobacco, violence, and stress. A brief review of each topic will offer some insight into the influence of mass media on the health of America's youth. More importantly, the discussion will address how the concept of media literacy can be used to reduce the negative influences mass media are believed to have on young people's health-related attitudes and behaviors.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition is especially important for adolescents because of their accelerated body growth. In addition, their early dietary decisions can have lifelong health implications, e.g., obesity, poor nutrition, inadequate female reproductive development (Davies, 1993). Unfortunately, adolescents are susceptible to poor nutritional habits. They often eat with peers, rather than family. Because they are growing physically they snack a lot, but the snacks are usually high in fat and calories. Adolescents also are very busy, and they argue they do not have the time to eat properly (Davies, 1993).

These factors, which lead to poor diet decisions, are perpetuated by the media. One study estimated that early adolescents between two and 12 contributed to $82.4 billion in food and beverage purchases in 1990 (McNeal, 1992). Such a figure is alarming when studies reveal that advertised foods tend to be brand names that cost more and have little nutritional content (Dwyer,

1982), that 25 percent of prime-time and weekend daytime commercials are for food, with more than half pitching "junk" food (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982), and that there is a positive correlation between watching TV and obesity among the younger generation (Dietz & Gortmaker, 1985).

The more alarming issue deals with body image. Young adolescents are led to believe that the media-created image of the ideal body is how their bodies should look (Davies, 1993). This leads to females trying to look like Cindy Crawford and Kate Moss. In their attempt to have the perfect body, females often end up adopting fad diets that may lead to more serious eating disorders (Davies, 1993). Davies (1993) also points out that boys are susceptible to media body images because they want to build muscles like many actors and sports heroes. This desire to "bulk up" often leads to poor diet and possibly the use of steroids.

It is apparent that adolescents' attitudes about nutrition are constantly under siege by the media, both consciously and subconsciously. Media literacy provides the ammunition for young people to defend themselves. Teachers can choose from numerous assignments that will help students better understand the media messages about nutrition and related issues.

Considine and Haley (1992) offer a number of assignments that can be used to educate children and adolescents about nutritional messages in the media. One such assignment is useful for elementary and middle school students. Students select one episode from their favorite television program and record what each character eats and drinks. Videotaping the show will ensure the accuracy of their record. Student records are then summarized to create a chart that graphically depicts the food and drink consumption of popular television characters. Using the chart to guide the discussion, teachers can ask students about the nutritional value of the food and drink consumed by the characters, how often the characters snack, if the characters eat on the run, and whether the characters frequently eat at home, a restaurant, or the office. Other topics might explore the relationship between the type of foods eaten and a character's lifestyle, size, and weight. For example, do the lifeguards on "Baywatch" have a diet that will help or hinder their ability to save lives? (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Another assignment for elementary and middle school students deals with the issue of being overweight. Students are encouraged to identify the programs that feature overweight people and make a list of these characters. Teachers should ask students to identify the characters' gender, how healthy and happy they appear to be, whether they are in a drama or comedy, if their weight is a source of humor, and whether or not the characters acknowledge their weight problem (Considine & Haley, 1992). Each issue can be used as the springboard for a discussion about how overweight/obese people are portrayed on television.

Another possible assignment has been a part of health teachers' lesson plans for years. Health teachers, or any teacher for that matter, discussing nutrition with their students can require their pupils to keep a written record of what they eat and drink. Such an exercise is often used to illustrate how unbalanced most daily diets are. Teachers can take this exercise one step further and have students keep track of all the media messages on television that tempt them to eat or drink unhealthy products. Moreover, students can write down if they give in to temptation and why. Teachers can discuss the purpose of advertising with the youngsters, explain that the advertisers know children's weaknesses and exploit them, and then deconstruct an ad to help the students understand the surface and underlying messages (New Mexico Media Literacy Project, 1996).

A related assignment for a unit on nutrition involves fast food, an adolescent favorite. Most fast food chains offer nutritional guides on the products they sell. Teachers could break students up into groups, assign them a fast food chain, and give them the nutritional guides. Each group would report on the nutritional value of the chain's most heavily advertised products. Students could deconstruct selected ads and compare the amount and accuracy of the nutritional information in the ads with the nutritional guides. This exercise will make students more aware of what they are putting into their bodies when they eat and/or drink such products.

Another assignment might focus on the issues of body image and stereotypes. The assignment would be to create a commercial using a male spokes-model and a female spokes-model. Students could study existing advertisements and determine how males and females are typically portrayed. They could make it a point not to depict either gender in a stereotypical way.

Through such an assignment students learn much more than how to get a message across about a product. They learn about the inherent meaning of body image, body language, and stereotypes.

Sexual Information

Mass media also provide formal and informal messages about sexuality. Bandura and Walters (1963) established decades ago that the media shape children's and adolescents' attitudes and perceptions about sex by providing models for social learning. Since sex in our culture is private, students must learn about it from alternate sources (Considine & Haley, 1992). Social learning theory suggests that film and television characters are information models who stand in for real-life experiences (Bandura & Walters, 1963). These stand-ins often contradict societal norms. Two of television's most popular shows, "Moonlighting" and "Cheers," were based on the male leads trying to sleep with the female leads. Such pursuits "trivialized sex and made heroes out of immature males" (Considine & Haley, 1992, p. 85).

The greatest concern about the sexual information disseminated by the mass media is that it is value-laden (Davies, 1993). Glasser (1990/91) points out that all television shows answer the question, "What is ethical behavior?" Adolescents are adopting norms for their behavior based on what they see and hear in the media. The norm of having multiple sexual partners is a constant theme on NBC's "Friends." The character "Joey" is known for his sexual conquests. One of the female characters, "Monica," is often the target of jokes about her inactive sex life. The underlying message is that it is okay to have sex with lots of people; otherwise, you may be the punchline of someone's joke. Liebert and Sprafkin (1988) concluded that adolescents who watch a lot of sexual content on TV are less satisfied with their sexuality and develop misconceptions, which are similar to the "Friends" example, about sex.

There is a serious concern that younger viewers who are seeing many sexual situations on TV are not being educated about the consequences of many of the behaviors (Brown & Walsh-Childers, 1994). Strasburger (1989) found that of 14,000 sexual references on television each year, only 165 dealt with sex education, contraception, abortion, or sexually transmitted diseases.

Television is not the only medium that is providing sexually explicit messages. Rock music lyrics and videos have become extremely explicit in the past two decades (AAP News, November 1988). Health care professionals are quite concerned because the trend in lyrics has been to emphasize sex over romance (Fedler, Hall, & Tanzi, 1982) and in videos to have heavy sexual content, which often has elements of bondage and sadomasochism (Baxter, DeRiemer, Landini, Leslie, & Singletary, 1985; Sherman & Dominick, 1986).

Although sexuality is a difficult topic to discuss with youngsters, teachers need to create media literate students who can evaluate the sexual information provided by the mass media. An assignment for middle and high school-aged students involves identifying advertisements that use sex appeal and sexual images to market various products. Teachers can guide students' analysis by asking questions like: What does sex have to do with the product? What creates the sex appeal: the people, the props, the camera angles, the music, the sound effects, or the set? Students can also compare the interactions of the characters in the commercials with real life behaviors (Considine & Haley, 1992). It should become evident to students that putting on cologne or perfume each morning will not result in an instant sexual experience. Through these exercises students will be more aware of how sex is used to sell a product, even though it has little to do with the actual product.

Franzblau, Sprafkin, and Rubinstein (1977) found that sexual material was common in situation comedies, "supporting the conventional notion that sex is a disturbing topic and is best handled humorously" (p. 170). Middle and high school-aged students also can explore how sex is depicted in situation comedies by studying the plots of these programs and attending to the humor associated with sex. Teachers can provide students with copies of TV Guide and let them identify which comedies use sex as a plot. Students also can look at the ads in TV Guide to note how words and images are used to stress sex as a selling point. In addition, students can analyze an episode of their favorite situation comedy and take note of sexual contact and humor, evaluate how female characters are presented, and compare the behaviors of the characters with the behaviors of real people (Considine & Haley, 1992). Such exercises will help students see how situation

comedies contribute to the notion that sex is a taboo subject that can only be discussed in a funny way.

Teens on television have dealt with sexual experiences in different ways. Early television teens, like those on "The Brady Bunch" and "My Three Sons," had few sexual experiences. Most of them had crushes, went on "dreamy" dates, and maybe got a kiss on the cheek. In recent years teens have graduated to more realistic experiences. Some chose not to engage in sexual intercourse because they were not ready to do so. Examples include Mallory on "Family Ties" and Buddy on "Family." Others elected to explore sex, like Doogie Howser on "Doogie Howser, M.D." and Darlene and Becky on "Roseanne" (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Teachers can help students deal with their own struggles about sex by studying teenage television characters. After the television teens have been identified, students should discuss how realistically each character's sexuality is depicted. For example, Becky and Darlene in "Roseanne" have talked about their menstrual cycles and French kissing. Is it normal for teenage girls to discuss these subjects? In "The Wonder Years," Kevin and Winnie were overwhelmed with anxiety when they were forced to "make out" at a party. They elected to go to their respective homes and wait until they were mature enough to handle "making out." Are Kevin's and Winnie's feelings natural (Considine & Haley, 1992)? Teachers can use such depictions to help students understand it is normal to feel anxious about sex and that they should talk about their feelings. The discussions produced by this exercise should reduce students' anxiety about sex and help them feel more comfortable with their emotions and physical changes.

Alcohol & Tobacco

Sex is often associated with alcohol in the media. Gorgeous, sexy female models are a constant in beer and wine advertisements that target males. Television shows often portray alcohol as a means to sex. In addition, alcohol is associated with success, excitement, and good times. For younger media consumers, media depictions of alcohol are tantalizing and alluring. A 1991 report, Youth and Alcohol: A National Survey, said that 35 percent of all wine coolers in the United States are consumed by high school juniors and seniors. The report also revealed that

these upperclassmen drink 1.1 billion cans of beer, and half of the 20.7 million seventh through twelfth graders drink (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991).

Researchers have concluded that advertising is part of the reason alcohol is popular among the youth of America (Atkin, Neuendorf, & McDermott, 1983; Atkin, Hocking, & Block, 1984). Jean Kilbourne (1991) believes advertisers perpetuate several myths about alcohol to young people. These myths include the notion that drinking is risk-free, that individuals cannot survive without alcohol, that problem-drinking is normal, and that alcohol is like a magic potion that will bring happiness, wealth, prestige, and sexual satisfaction. In addition, advertisers also support the myth that alcohol and sports are a package and that the media would tell the public if alcohol was really dangerous (Kilbourne, 1991).

Drinking is common not only in advertisements, but prevalent in television shows as well. Studies have found that drinking on TV has increased compared to smoking (Signorielli, 1987; Wallack, Breed, & Cruz, 1987; Wallack, Grube, Madden, & Breed, 1990), that alcohol is the beverage of choice on TV (Signorielli, 1990), and that most people drink when there is a crisis in their lives (Breed & DeFoe, 1981).

Although alcohol is heavily advertised in this country, there is one product that tops it: cigarettes. Like alcohol, cigarettes are marketed to young people, although both the alcohol and tobacco industries challenge such a claim. Marketing to young people is vital for the tobacco industry to survive. As more and more smokers quit, new smokers must be found to replace them (Davies, 1993). It appears the advertising is working. Since Camel cigarettes introduced the "Old Joe Camel" campaign in 1988, sales to those under 18 have increased from $6 million to $476 million annually (DiFranza, Richards, Paulman, Wolf-Gillespie, Fletcher, Jaffe, & Murray, 1991).

Cigarettes often are associated with health, vitality, and good times in advertisements (Altman, Slater, Albright, & Maccoby, 1987; Pollay, 1991). Such associations make smoking appealing to younger audiences. They see cigarettes as a symbol of independence and being "cool." Advertisers try to capitalize on these perceptions and target audiences as young as 12 years old; they are often successful (Aiken, Leathar, & O'Hagan, 1985; Covell, 1992).

The high volume of alcohol and tobacco advertisements makes media literacy training a must for young people. Teachers have several options to help arm students with the weapons to battle the marketing specialists. One assignment begins with taking a survey to determine how many students smoke. Data collection should include the students' gender, when they started smoking, the brand they smoke, how often they smoke, why they smoke, and if other members of their family smoke. The survey can be done anonymously or within a class discussion. Most students will not suggest that advertising influenced their decision to smoke because most people are unaware of their motivations for purchasing and using various products (Considine & Haley, 1992). Teachers should create and share a profile of the smoking behaviors of the class.

The profile can be used to carry out several other lessons. Teachers can collect magazine ads for the cigarettes commonly smoked by the class. Students should study the words and images in the ads, paying attention to the activities depicted, the moods created, and the settings. In addition, comparisons of locations, sex, age, jobs depicted, and social status can be made among the ads. Students can be asked to consider differences between ads for cigarettes preferred by female class members versus cigarettes preferred by male class members (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Another dimension of this activity is to collect ads for cigarettes that do not appear in the class survey. Teachers should point out that these ads are for products students are not attracted to and have rejected. Students should determine what it is about these particular brands that are not appealing. The class should identify elements of the advertisements that might suggest why people similar in age and social background would choose not to smoke the brands in the ads. Through these exercises students will realize how well advertisers target young consumers and be more aware of the persuasive techniques advertisers use (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Considine and Haley (1992) offer an assignment that fosters logic and critical thinking skills among senior high school students. The exercise focuses on aspects of the tobacco debate that are often overlooked. Students should consider health and medical issues: Should a harmful product like cigarettes be allowed to be produced, and if it is produced, should it be advertised? Attention to ethical and moral issues is important, too. Students should consider the controversy

over profiting from a harmful product in their own country as well as Third World countries whose citizens are less informed about the dangers of the product. Also, students should consider the economic impact of tobacco in America. Tobacco is the livelihood of thousands of Americans; therefore, bans on cigarettes and/or decreased use of tobacco products might threaten the survival of these individuals. In addition, tobacco provides a boost to the national economy because it is the sixth largest cash crop in the United States. Students need to contemplate what smoking and cigarette advertising bans mean to the national economy. They also need to consider losses in productivity and increased health care costs that are due to smoking-related problems. In addition, political, cultural, constitutional, and informational issues related to a smoke-free society can be addressed with students (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Some of the same exercises described above can be used for lessons on alcohol, but a number of other activities also are useful. Teachers should collect several magazine ads or television ads that promote alcohol and have students analyze them. Students should identify the type of alcohol in the ad, the age and sex of those who appear in the ad, the setting, the activities the models/actors are engaged in, the mood suggested by the body language and facial expressions of the models/actors, and in what type of magazines or during which programs these ads would appear. One again, teachers should point out how well advertisers target their audiences and change their sales pitch based on what they know about a particular audience (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Another useful exercise gets students involved in the creation of media messages. Students can develop a design for a poster or series of posters to warn about the dangers of alcohol or make others aware of how advertisers target adolescents. The posters can be used in the school, library, or community. Such an exercise helps students understand the process of creating media messages and makes them more aware of how advertisers target young audiences (Considine & Haley, 1992). This exercise also can be adapted for television. Students may want to create a commercial targeted at a specific audience or produce a PSA to promote responsible drinking or the dangers of alcohol abuse. If production facilities are available, it would be ideal for students to produce their work. If the school does not have the necessary equipment, perhaps the

local community access television station can be used to bring the students' work to the small screen (Considine & Haley, 1992).

An additional exercise that will help students better understand media messages about alcohol and tobacco involves recording all incidents of smoking and drinking on several television programs. Students need to watch a variety of programs, including situation comedies, dramas, crime shows, and soap operas. Each incident of smoking or alcohol consumption should be recorded, along with a description of the characters. This description should include gender, race, age, religious affiliation, and whether the character is a lead or supporting actor. The context in which the behavior occurs must also be noted, e.g., is the person drinking alone, in a social situation, at a restaurant. Students also should consider whether the characters suffer any consequences from using these products. For example, does a character have a smoker's cough or does he/she become abusive after drinking? Teachers should discuss media modeling of smoking and drinking with students and have them compare it to the use of these products in real life (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Violence

The impact of the mass media on early adolescents has been studied extensively. One of the most intensive areas of research has been violence in the media. Although there was a battle for a number of years over whether or not televised violence leads to subsequent aggressive behaviors, most researchers contend there is a connection (Murray, Rubinstein, & Comstock; 1972; Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982). Because adolescents watch about 20 hours of television a week (Nielsen Media Research, 1990) there is serious concern about the impact violent portrayals have on their behavior. Media executives, parents, teachers, and communities cannot dismiss violent programming as pure entertainment because the media have the power to model attitudes and behavior (Considine & Haley, 1992). With more and more adolescents becoming victims of crime as well as committing the crimes (Davies, 1993), the aforementioned groups need to reexamine how they can help combat this growing trend.

Several activities can be used with elementary, middle, and high school students to make them aware of the impact of violence in the media. For younger children, defining violence is important. Teachers should ask students to describe the violence they typically witness on television and talk about the type of characters who commit violent acts. Teachers should note whether the characters are criminals, police officers, superheroes, or a combination of characters and consider how realistic students' perceptions are. Since children's programming contains more violence than most prime-time shows, children may have an inaccurate impression of violence. Teachers need to identify these impressions and help children understand that not all people behave like the characters in their favorite shows (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Related to this exercise is an assignment that asks students to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Teachers should compile a list of cartoon programs their students watch regularly and identify the key characters. Students should describe the action and violence within the program and identify which characters are the most violent. Then, students need to list the type of behaviors the characters engage in and explain why they act this way. Some students may see the acts as justified and acceptable. Teachers can talk about why such behaviors are often not acceptable and discuss alternative behaviors (Considine & Haley, 1992).

An excellent activity for younger students makes them consider what would happen if they acted like characters on television. Once again, teachers should have students describe acts of violence in several cartoons. Following the students' descriptions, teachers can ask students to describe what would happen if they acted like the cartoon character, having students consider their parents' reaction if they hit someone or the physical pain of hitting another person. Teachers can ask the students if the cartoon violence represents what it really feels like to be hit, blown up, or run over (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Middle and high school students can consider the functions of visual violence by discussing some of the concepts related to viewing violent programming. Some research suggests that viewing violent content results in subsequent aggressive behavior (Murray, Rubinstein, & Comstock; 1972; Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982); other research claims that viewing violence relieves tension and reduces the likelihood of violent behavior (Feschbach, 1961). Students can

examine these and other notions about the impact of violent programming to better understand the potential effects of visual violence. Students should consider violence as an anesthetic. This notion suggests that the more viewers see violence, the more they become desensitized to it. As a result, viewers are more likely to be violent or accept other people's violent behavior. Another hypothesized function of violent programming is catharsis. Watching violence on television allows a viewer to let off steam, thus reducing the probability of future violent acts. Social sanctioning is also a possible function of violent programming. The more it appears on television, the more acceptable it becomes in society. Finally, violence on television may just be a reflection of society. All of these concepts should be introduced to the students; then, they should break up into groups to develop arguments to support their respective claims (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Stress

Another area of concern is the amount of stress indirectly caused by the mass media (Davies, 1993). Because early adolescence is a stressful period in life (Hamburg, 1974; Elkind, 1986), younger media consumers are more susceptible to additional stress created by the media. Educator Neil Postman (1982) argues that television exposes young viewers to adult knowledge before they are prepared to handle it; television essentially blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Kids who try to imitate behaviors they see on television, e.g., sexual situations, often experience confusion and dejection because they are unable to reproduce the behaviors in the same manner (Chlubna, 1991). In essence, the media messages children receive are pushing them to be adults before it is time (Elkind, 1981). This pressure to act like an adult causes undue stress, which can lead to unnecessary health problems or cause adolescents to cope with stress in ways similar to those portrayed in the media, e.g., drinking, smoking (Davies, 1993).

Most of the previously discussed media literacy activities can be used to discuss how the media produce unnecessary stress on adolescents. Teachers simply need to add questions that directly address stress-related issues into each exercise. For example, assignments dealing with diet and body image are ideal for talking about how the media put pressure on teens to have the perfect body, while tempting them with advertisements for junk food. Advertisements for alcohol

and tobacco, which often are targeted to younger audiences, perpetuate the notion that if you use these products you will be more like an adult thus, creating additional pressure to be "grown up." In addition, television portrayals of people in crisis who turn to alcohol provide students with inappropriate models for dealing with stress in their lives.

A possible assignment for students to better understand how much stress the media creates for them involves role-playing. Students can analyze a television program that depicts an adolescent trying to decide if he is ready for his first sexual experience. Teachers can guide the discussion to help students determine the options available to the character. Groups of students can act out these options and discuss why the character made the decision he did. By acting out these situations, students may react more responsibly if they are ever in a similar situation.

Future Research

A strong argument has been made to use media literacy to teach young people how to interpret and evaluate health messages in the mass media. The next logical step is to assess the effectiveness of media literacy as a health education tool. This can be accomplished through experimental studies like Austin and Johnson's (1995) study, which examined the effects of media literacy training on third-graders' decisionmaking for alcohol. Findings indicate that third-graders have established beliefs about alcohol and alcohol portrayals on television, but these beliefs can be changed through a critical viewing intervention. Guided by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1994) and Austin, Roberts, and Nass' (1990) model of television interpretation processes, additional experimental studies should provide increased evidence of the effectiveness of media literacy training on adolescents' ability to interpret, evaluate, and analyze health messages in the mass media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Health education involves issues ranging from "self-image, diet, school violence, alcohol, and tobacco, [to] pregnancy, [and] sex" (Considine, 1994, p. 27). All of these topics require an understanding of media messages by children as well as health educators (Considine, 1994).

Considine (1994) argues that health educators should be able to do more than just identify media messages about health; he insists that educators provide students with frameworks and strategies to help them understand how advertising and other media messages influence their health beliefs and behaviors. Davies (1993) also recommends media literacy as a regular course of study for those interested in the education profession. "It is incumbent upon our educational system to prepare its students with the skills necessary to be able to approach the media critically, particularly advertising. In addition, the middle school years are an ideal time to teach media literacy" (Davies, 1993, p. S-33).

Considine and Haley (1992) believe media literacy is a way to teach young people about the nature of advertising, emphasizing that advertisers sell more than a product; they sell an image or lifestyle. Adolescents need to be aware that advertisers know their insecurities and effectively appeal to them.

> Adolescents are particularly susceptible to marketing strategies because of their developmental state and their need for security. Although their clothing and appearances sometimes suggest rebellion, it tends to be a rebellion more about image or appearance than ideas, and within the confines of their cliques, individuality and deviance are not rewarded. At the very period that teens are in the process, consciously or otherwise, of defining who they are and what they want, advertisers can subvert the search for self through marketing of prepackaged identities (Considine & Haley, 1992, p. 110).

The media literacy movement must give more attention to health issues immediately because American adolescent health is in a state of crisis (Hechinger, 1992). According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, by age 15 nearly a quarter of adolescents practice harmful or dangerous behaviors (Hechinger, 1992). Research indicates that adolescents are significantly influenced by aggressive marketing campaigns, most notably the Spuds McKenzie (beer) and Old Joe Camel (cigarette) campaigns (Fischer et al., 1991; Hechinger, 1992). Such advertisements have come under scrutiny by parents, activist groups and the Surgeon General's office (Hechinger, 1992).

Marketing strategies are not the only target of interest. The Carnegie Council recognized the need to respond to health problems among adolescents by examining the cultural context in

which youngsters make their decisions (Hechinger, 1992). Teenage smoking among females will not be reduced until researchers identify the motivations behind smoking. Is it really the cigarette advertisements that keep them smoking, or is it the belief that smoking substitutes for eating? "Young girls obsessed with staying slim are therefore responding to much more than the taste of tobacco or the persuasion of cigarette advertisers; they are responding to a culture that seems preoccupied with slimness and that judges women by their appearance" (Considine, 1995, p. 35).

Teen sexuality is also of concern in the health community because the media influence teenagers' attitudes and beliefs about their sexuality. The most alarming aspect of this issue is the finding that much of what teens learn about sex from the media does not address the potential consequences of these behaviors or the necessity of sexual responsibility (Brown & Walsh-Childers, 1994).

The Carnegie Council made recommendations similar to the governmental report, Mass Media and Health: Opportunities for Improving the Nation's Health, which called for teaching children and adolescents to become critical viewers of the mass media. In a media-dominated society, it is imperative to evaluate critically the barrage of messages sent by the media on a daily basis. Yet for many students, the ability to think critically is underdeveloped (Sneed, Wulfemeyer, Van Ommeren, & Riffe, 1989), and, until recently, most schools were not taking advantage of the opportunity to develop students' critical thinking skills through media education. Schools must realize that the living room has become a learning room. They must open up to media education and properly train teachers how to use the media as an instructional tool, or students will continue to be vulnerable to the messages and values communicated by the media (Considine, 1990).

> Though teenagers are constantly under a barrage of messages delivered by television, radio, and pop music, usually in isolation from a adults, schools have hardly begun to teach them how to view and listen critically. Yet such a capacity ought to be a major component of life-skills education (Hechinger, 1992, p.53).

Unfortunately, one of the biggest drawbacks in American schools is lack of teacher training. Despite a lack of formal training some teachers feel qualified to teach about the mass

media (Wulfemeyer et al., 1990). Duncan (1989) called for in-service training throughout the school year and summer courses for teachers to learn how to teach media studies. This year-round training is unavoidable because American schools are already far behind other educational systems. It is going to take a concerted effort on the part of teachers and administrators to overcome this knowledge gap. Duncan (1989) argued for a summation and evaluation of media literacy programs in other countries. Such research is vital to the implementation of media education into the curricula of schools throughout the United States. Educators in America will not fully endorse media education programs until they see proof that the programs do work.

Through media literacy students can learn to evaluate critically the health messages that are contained in various media outlets. Once students realize how the media package messages, they will be more aware of what to look for and how to interpret what they see and hear. Any health-related messages will be scrutinized and judged with a critical eye. Such scrutiny should make students more aware of their health and encourage them to avoid behaviors detrimental to their health.

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